

**Public Hearing**  
**Rockland St Redesign Meeting**  
**Council Chambers**  
**Thursday, October 6, 2016**  
**6 p.m.**

Mr. Waltman, President of Council, called the meeting to order. He stated that although this session was advertised as a public hearing, we will use the phrase public meeting at the request of PennDOT. He stated that the purpose of the session is unchanged. Council is conducting this meeting to obtain public input on the proposed changes to Rockland Street between North 13<sup>th</sup> and North 11<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Attending:** City Councilors Reed, Marmarou, Twyman, Slifko, Waltman, Goodman-Hinnershitz, Daubert, City Clerk Kelleher, Asst. City Solicitor Butler, Managing Director Steckman, Public Works Director Johnson

**I. Presentation from the Administration**

Mr. Steckman introduced the issue and introduced those involved in the redesign project that were present. He described the recent outreach to affected businesses and the September 11, 2016 College Heights Community Council (CHCC) meeting.

Jim Hartling, consultant, stated that he was retained by the Wyomissing Foundation between 2009-10 to explore options and to develop a concept to benefit the core areas of Reading, including the Albright neighborhood. He stated that the Wyomissing Foundation was originally formed by the Thun Family and that the foundation is 100 years old.

Mr. Hartling stated that an effort was made to consult with people who live in the Albright area along with businesses and interested parties including the College. He explained that Albright considered many issues including restoring the viability of the Rockland Plaza strip mall. He stated that the original design was visionary and very costly. The design was eventually honed down to the design on display tonight. He stated that student rental housing on the east side of the strip mall was part of the original concept to provide off campus housing away from the adjoining residential area. He stated that TAP (Transportation Alternative Program) funding was considered as a potential funding source. TAP is a federal program that flows through PennDOT. He stated that funding was awarded in 2014.

Mr. Johnson asked how many of those attending this meeting heard the presentation made at the September 11<sup>th</sup> CHCC meeting. Approximately 50% of those present raised their hands in response.

Mr. Johnson stated that the redesign affects Rockland Street between North 11<sup>th</sup> and North 13<sup>th</sup> Street and is considered a Complete Streets Project. The project will include street lighting, commuter improvements (ADA, bicycle, pedestrian and vehicular), greening and safety features. He explained that the draft design turns the four (4) lane street into a two (2) lane street with a bike lane on each side and a landscaped median strip down the middle that includes cutaways to allow access to the major businesses on both sides of the street.

Scott Anderson, traffic engineer from Great Valley Consultants, stated that he assisted in the preparation of the draft design based on the traffic impact analysis conducted in the area and PennDOT regulations. He stated that the traffic study was conducted in late April 2015 on one (1) Wednesday and Saturday. He stated that after the study he determined that the street could handle the new design with adjustments to the timing of the traffic signals.

Mr. Anderson explained that the truck turn radius was evaluated and it is believed that the bike lanes will help ease the truck turn radius. He explained that generally a lane of traffic is 12.6' wide and that the cutaways in the median will provide left hand turns into the major businesses.

Mr. Anderson stated that the lighting portion of the project will cost approximately \$311K and the road redesign will cost approximately \$292K (Federal Grant). He stated that the Wyomissing Foundation covered the cost of the design work and the design work to develop the rental housing project. There are \$390K in private funds dedicated to the project, with a \$50K contribution coming from Albright.

In response to a citizen question, Mr. Anderson stated that the peak hours used for the traffic study was 7 to 9 am and 4 to 6 pm on Wednesday and 11 am to 1 pm on Saturday, with a total traffic count of 6,226 vehicle trips.

In response to a citizen question, Mr. Anderson stated that the parking spaces estimated for the rental housing project was considered in the analysis.

A citizen stated that the parking estimate could be quite different from the actual impact when the housing project is occupied and the vacant Giant building is occupied, along with the two (2) restaurants planned for the strip mall. Mr. Johnson stated that they will take those comments under advisement and reassess the analysis.

In response to a citizen question, Mr. Anderson stated that he did not predict how much slower traffic would move if the project is completed.

In response to a citizen question, Mr. Anderson stated that Albright activities such as sporting events were not included in the traffic study and that the study was only conducted on a

single Wednesday and Saturday.

A citizen inquired why this was changed to a public meeting, when federal regulations require public hearings. She noted that federal regulations place much weight on citizen input. Mr. Waltman explained that the change was made at PennDOT's request.

Mr. Steckman explained that PennDOT explained that funding could be jeopardized if a public hearing is held. He explained the unintentional missteps with the affected community and obtaining their input over the past years. He noted that the former administration failed to include the community input. He stated that this project could well be the first of many that will occur in the area. He stated that there may be follow up projects on North 13<sup>th</sup> St. and Hampden Blvd.

A citizen inquired if retaining four (4) lanes of traffic was ever considered. Mr. Anderson stated that the design never considered retaining the four (4) lane street.

A citizen inquired why a resolution was proposed before the required meeting with the public. Mr. Waltman explained that the resolution was to authorize the funding for the project and that resolution was tabled to allow a comment period.

In response to a question from a citizen, Mr. Anderson stated that there was not a large number of bicycles observed. There were 13 bicycles observed on Rockland Street, 6-7 pedestrians observed in the morning and 27 pedestrians observed in the evening during peak hours.

In response to a question from a citizen, Mr. Hartling stated that the President of Albright was on the citizen input committee, along with people who support the Wyomissing Foundation and those who have businesses in the Rockland St area. He recognized that there was no outreach to the CHCC organization or membership.

A citizen inquired if some other form of the redesign project could achieve the same goal. Mr. Johnson stated that this project was developed based on the input obtained from the group referred to by Mr. Hartling (see above).

### **Public Comment**

Mr. Waltman opened the floor for public comment. He stated that those registered will be called in the order that they registered to speak.

**Pat Hatt, of North 14<sup>th</sup> Street**, stated that she and her husband have lived in their home for 40 years. Their home is one block from Albright College. She described the change in her neighborhood since the surge of off campus student rentals began. She described the

ongoing problems experienced in blocks with off campus student rentals and the continual need for police support. She stated that the current President of Albright has a very poor relationship with the surrounding community. She stated that in response to complaints about student behavior he advised the neighbors to move. However, she noted that there has been some improvement with Albright due to the work of a CHCC, City and Albright committee formed to discuss various issues about Albright students in off campus rentals. She questioned why Albright continues to expand its academic buildings without equal focus on the available on campus housing for students. She suggested using the funding dedicated to this redesign to make improvements to the affected neighborhood.

**Maegen Wagner, of Locust St.,** expressed concern that the impact of the new restaurants and rental housing in the Rockland Plaza were only loosely considered in the traffic study. She stated that the new rental housing unit will house 265 students and the new restaurants will easily bump that number well past 300 people. She described the traffic backups that occur now and she predicted that the traffic backups will be much worse with the addition of the rental units and new restaurants. She also questioned how the traffic study peak hours were determined as those times do not reflect the highest volumes of traffic in the area. She expressed concern about the limited turning radius fire apparatus will have when the street is converted to two (2) lanes.

**Ann Sheehan, of North 15<sup>th</sup> St.,** stated that she has lived in this area for 20 years and that she loves living in this neighborhood due to its walkability. She expressed support for the proposed project as it will benefit the area. She stated that she does not understand the objections to the project. She suggested that everyone envision the neighborhood for the next generation.

**Mike Hussle, representing CVS Corporate,** was not present. Mr. Marmarou stated that Mr. Hussle is delayed due to an accident on the Turnpike or Expressway. He stated that Mr. Hussle asked him to state that CVS is opposed to the project as it will negatively impact their business and customer base.

**Doris Leisawitz, of Rockland Street,** stated that she participated on the committee formed to consider this project. She stated that she went door to door in her neighborhood to talk with neighbors about Albright issues. She reported that off campus student problems, Albright's lack of commitment to the neighborhood and quality of life problems were the most prevalent issues. She expressed the belief that the new design for Rockland Street will uplift the area. She noted that Albright is a good anchor for the community and that neighbors should not let old issues cloud their judgment.

**Tony Calvaresi, of Rockland Street,** thanked Council for providing the neighbors with the opportunity to speak about this issue. He stated that while he sees both sides of the issue, he

is concerned for the traffic nightmare that will be created if the proposed design is implemented. He stated that the proposed design will negatively impact residents and businesses. He noted the difficulties that will be experienced when vehicles will be unable to make a left turn when they are leaving the parking lots of businesses on Rockland Street. He also noted the intensity of the traffic coming to and leaving Wawa. He suggested creating a fresh design that will alleviate traffic problems.

**Ruth Martelli, of Palm Street**, stated that she resides in the college neighborhood. She expressed the belief that a new design for Rockland Street is a great idea. She suggested that the neighbors work with Albright and the City to define a compromise.

**Isabelle Fick, of Palm Street**, noted that the traffic problems on Rockland Street when the City plows one lane east and one lane west are exactly the same problems that will exist if the proposed design is used. She expressed the belief that medians are better suited for residential, not commercial neighborhoods.

**Charles Milch, of Alsace Road**, stated that he is fortunate enough to reside in the Albright area; however, he expressed concern about the traffic problems that will occur if the street is reduced to only two (2) lanes. He expressed the belief that pedestrians are at risk now and that the new design will increase those problems. He also expressed concern about the issues with the two (2) bus stops on the north side of Rockland Street. He expressed the belief that two (2) lanes of traffic will not work.

Mr. Milch suggested that the type of traffic study that was performed was inadequate and he suggested a new study that considers the full build out of the Rockland Plaza. He expressed the belief that a grassy median is beautiful but unnecessary in the proposed location. He suggested adding the landscaping and lighting on the north and south sides and moving the median to Hampden Blvd or North 13<sup>th</sup> Street, where it would have a better impact on traffic and pedestrian activity. He stated that speeding is more prevalent on Hampden Blvd. than it is on Rockland Street. He suggested that the City consider other design options.

**Jeff Gattone, of Lorraine Road**, stated that the first time the Albright area became aware of the proposed project was when Ms. Kelleher, president of the CHCC, emailed everyone about the presentation at the September 11<sup>th</sup> meeting. He expressed the belief that the community should have had their first look well before September 11, 2016, and preferably before the design was drawn. He expressed the belief that the peak hours used by the consultant were flawed. He stated that traffic moving north and east is the heaviest. He expressed the belief that the peak hours occur at dismissal time from each class. He noted that majority of Albright students do not walk or bike, they drive. He stated that he serves on the Zoning Hearing Board and this Board is required to consider the impact a proposed use will have on the community. He suggested that those considering this design also consider the impact on

the neighborhood. He expressed the belief that this design will cause horrible traffic problems.

**Claire Eyrich, of Palm Street**, stated that she has lived in the Albright neighborhood for 45 years and she applauds Albright's efforts. She expressed concern about the traffic that will be imposed by the five (5) story rental property going up in the Rockland Plaza. She noted the poor condition of the Albright Woods units and suggested that Albright consider restoring those units and adding more units in that area. She expressed the belief that the Albright area is not a biking community. She suggested making improvements to the sidewalks instead of the proposed traffic changes. She stated that tractor trailers struggle to turn from North 11<sup>th</sup> Street onto Rockland Street and moving to a two (2) lane system will increase those problems and create additional safety issues. She noted that her friend was killed as a pedestrian in this neighborhood. She suggested revisions to the design as moving to a two (2) lane street is ill-advised.

**Gil Tardiff, of Amity Street**, expressed concern with the design proposed. He expressed the belief that moving to a two (2) lane system will create traffic problems. He suggested re-evaluating the issue and considering a new design that retains four (4) lanes of traffic.

**Maryann Ciarlone, of North 5<sup>th</sup> Street**, was not present.

**Jim Fegley of North 17<sup>th</sup> Street**, stated that he concurs with the majority and that his questions are answered and his comments reflect those already heard by the majority of those who spoke this evening.

**Bernard Kaplan, of Hampden Blvd.**, expressed the belief that most of his comments have already been heard. He noted that traffic lights do not make streets safer. He expressed the belief that the proposed design will negatively impact the 28 businesses in this area and the tractor trailer trucks that serve these businesses. He expressed the belief that Rockland Street should be expanded not reduced in size. He suggested the installation of better street lighting on North 13<sup>th</sup> Street and the installation of a pedestrian bridge over North 13<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Paul Hoh, of Hampden Blvd.**, stated that he could be more supportive of the proposed design if those who created it could refer him to a location where a similar design could be observed. He stated that he is not an obstructionist by nature but he believes that the proposed design will be problematic. He noted that the vacant lot between Weis markets and CVS could one day be an operating business and add to the traffic issues in this block, which have not been factored in. He stated that as those leaving business parking lots will not be able to make a left turn they will need to find alternate routes, which could negatively impact the businesses and create serious traffic problems. He stated that large tractors cannot make the turns now and a smaller turning radius will increase those problems. He agreed that the

design is beautiful; however, it creates traffic problems.

Mr. Steckman stated that Weis Markets owns the vacant lot between Weis and CVS.

**Larry Miller, of North 15<sup>th</sup> Street**, stated that many of his comments were already expressed several times. He stated that the median will create traffic problems where there are no problems at all. He expressed concern that the City is considering solutions to a nonexistent problem. He stated that Albright students are not all bright.

**Mike Hussle, of CVS Corporate**, stated that he is the project manager for Pennsylvania CVS Corporate. He apologized for being tardy due to a traffic accident that made his trip from the Philadelphia area take five (5) hours, rather than the usual two (2) hours. He expressed the belief that the creation of two (2) lanes of traffic will create traffic problems that will be detrimental to CVS. He expressed the belief that the area is beautiful already and suggested adding trees and landscaping to the sidewalk areas along with lighting. He expressed the belief that the area is well suited for the CVS customers now and the proposed changes create many traffic problems which will harm the business CVS does. He described the difficulties people will have exiting from the CVS parking lot if the redesign takes place.

**Note: Jerry Richter, of North 15<sup>th</sup> Street**, was registered to speak in support of the project at the meeting but he was inadvertently not called to the podium. He brought the lapse to the attention of the City Clerk after the meeting concluded.

### **Council Comment**

Mr. Waltman expressed the belief that the project contains many flaws and risks. He suggested making changes to the proposed design.

Mr. Marmarou, stated that the Planning Commission was not notified about this project until the City Clerk brought it to their attention and that they are required by the Municipalities Planning Code to review projects that affect the streetscape. He noted that while the new rental units on Rockland Plaza will house 265 students, there are only 199 parking spaces for that area. He expressed the belief that the proposed design creates pedestrian safety problems. He questioned PennDOT's involvement, as this street is not in the State highway system. He expressed frustration that the CHCC neighbors were not consulted about the project earlier.

Ms. Reed asked Ms. Leisawitz if she could provide documentation on her door-to-door visits. Ms. Leisawitz stated that she went door-to-door for approximately one (1) week about 3-4 years ago.

Ms. Reed asked Mr. Hartling if the design can be massaged to make a reasonable

compromise. She also questioned Riverplace's involvement in the project.

Mr. Hartling stated that Riverplace was merely an entity through which the bills for this project were paid.

Mr. Johnson stated that he is unsure how much flexibility the project has at this point in time. He noted that this plan is significantly different than the draft approved by RATS a few years ago, as PennDOT made adjustments. He expressed the belief that the Wyomissing Foundation will be flexible with the design but he is unsure how flexible TAP will be. He stated that RATS members were briefed on the project at the meeting this afternoon and they gave no commitment for an extension of funding so revisions can be made. He stated that the RATS group wishes to hear Council's position first. He stated that an extension and redesign can be requested.

Mr. Steckman stated that he agreed to outreach to the CHCC through Ms. Kelleher. He stated that project delay was caused by the transition in administrations. He noted that he cannot explain why the previous administration excluded communication with the CHCC. He stated that if an extension is rejected by TAP, the funding goes back into a pool available for all municipalities.

Mr. Steckman stated that Thompson Bank sent a letter supporting the project today, as they believe the landscaping and lighting will improve the area.

Ms. Reed expressed the belief that Albright is a City treasure and she disagreed with the animosity that some express toward Albright and Albright students. She noted that Albright has been in Reading since 1875.

Mr. Slifko stated that while he likes some elements he cannot agree with changing four (4) lanes to two (2) lanes.

Mr. Twyman thanked those present for coming to express their opinions. He noted that the process was flawed due the exclusion of CHCC. He agreed that the street should remain a four (4) lane street, as moving to two (2) lanes creates too many problems.

Mr. Waltman thanked the citizens and the administration for attending this meeting. The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:10 pm.

*Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher CMC, City Clerk*